

Slandering Anarchists is the Only Disease: A critique of Chris Hedges' recent comments about Black Blocs

During a panel discussion on May Day, Amy Goodman asked Chris Hedges about his recent article titled "The Cancer within Occupy". After strong criticisms on his website, an interview in which he admitted to not having interviewed any Black Bloc participants, a piece by David Graeber warning of the dangers of violence against a group portrayed as cancerous, and even a critique by the International Bolshevik Tendency, Hedges maintained that "You do not want to have demonstrations where you permit people to cover their faces."

As others have pointed out, the central flaw of the article lies in treating black blocs as a coherent movement. The Wikipedia page linked from his article warns against this mistake in its second paragraph, stating that black bloc "is, rather, a tactic that may be adopted by groups of various motivations and methods." Hedges repeatedly refers to Black Bloc anarchists as a movement, and attributes to them a disdain for organization and organized groups like the Zapatistas. But there is no ideological prerequisite for joining a Black Bloc: they are composed of well-prepared groups, unprepared individuals interested in militant action, and perhaps some police agents, who are likely present in tamer areas also. Most members are anarchists, most support the Zapatistas, and most are interested in organizing, which is why they come in groups and sport similar gear.

Members of a Black Bloc sometimes do act unwisely, usually drawing the strongest criticism from other members. Hedges could have criticized the few who occasionally provoke police and endanger non-confrontational protestors. Instead he attributes to the black bloc the smashing of a coffee shop window in Oakland by an unmasked possible provocateur, then extends this false characterization to anyone wearing a bandana over their face. An entire movement of organization-hating violent machistas certainly makes for a more interesting story, but the genre should be fiction, not journalism.

This is what happens when a journalist writes about people without ever talking with them. Hedges listened to a few hours of anarchist radio in Eugene, Oregon, then read some blogs. He could have come to any Occupy General Assembly and asked to interview people with intimate knowledge of Black Blocs. Instead Hedges turned to someone who opposed Black Blocs, Derrick Jensen, as his sole expert. Like Hedges, Jensen fails to notice the heterogeneity of activists using black bloc tactics, and ignores the origin of these tactics as an effective response in Europe to police brutality and corporate-controlled media.

For many who use them, black bloc tactics are not about terror, they are about self-defense. A black bloc often acts to protect peaceful marchers. Members of a bloc use shields, gas masks, and bandanas (Continued on page 2)



Op-Ed

Everyday Struggles with Bigotry

"There is nothing more painful to me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps... then turn around and see somebody white and feel relieved." --Jesse Jackson

My name is Omar, from the Free Association of Anarchists, and I am sexist, racist, and homophobic. Now that I have likely shocked you, and hopefully captured your attention, I'll admit that I don't really mean that. Let me explain.

First off, a disclaimer. If your response to serious social ills takes the form of confessionals and atonement for one's personal mistakes, you run the risk of presenting these ills as problems that can be solved in the personal sphere alone, rather than the social-political-economic sphere. I do not intend to make that error here. However, the old feminist dictum that "the personal IS political" reminds us that our own actions and mistakes can help us better understand social issues. This is the approach I intend to take.

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The Peoples' Militia.

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soaked in vinegar to defend against clubs, projectiles, and tear gas. They may be ready with gloves and buckets of water to throw back hot tear-gas canisters or douse them. They also take great risks in de-arresting fellow marchers. When asked about this important role of Black Blocs, Hedges replied, "Let's not paint these people as the Boy Scouts, come on." When Boy Scouts start de-arresting protesters and protecting them from tear gas, I'll start encouraging my son to join up.

Even the mainstream of the Occupy movement is embracing many Black Bloc tactics. When members of our group, the Free Association of Anarchists, brought shields to Occupy L.A., no one else had them. As the eviction drew near, a majority of occupiers carried shields, and the phenomenon was apparently nationwide. This represents a possible transformation from an ethic of victimhood to one of self-defense. Hedges argues that mainstream people will be turned off by confrontation. I argue that historically oppressed people will be turned off by statements like, "Our greatest strength is our powerlessness..."

The worst thing about criticizing "violence" from activists is that it fails to recognize where real violence comes from. As "TD" commented on the "L.A. activist" website, "we carry signs and chant slogans. The police carry guns, batons, tear gas and bean bag rifles." Anything carried out by a Black Bloc pales in comparison to what Occupier Jen Waller described on Democracy Now!: "I was violently arrested with my friends and watched as bloodthirsty cops stomped on their faces, knelt on their necks, pulled them by their hair, and slammed them into windows. I watched as one friend was treated as a battering ram as they carried him into an MTA bus, slamming his head on every step and seat as they went along. I watched as a young woman's rib was broken, as she hyperventilated, convulsed and seized in the middle of the street."

When mainstream news outlets fail to report such brutality against protesters employing civil disobedience, other means of response become necessary.

Violence: Force used to injure or abuse.

I come from a community that knows state violence. It is not rare to be shot dead by some cop. Nor is it rare to be pulled over and get sent away to a cell, or deported. No doubt the paramilitary forces that drive/fly around in my streets are a new wave of colonizers that patrol to make sure everyone's home and scared.

Dis-empowered, and afraid, I began to ponder a plan to defend myself from state violence. I began by categorizing the different types of violence that I regularly witness. This is what I came up with: (1)physical brutality (2)law (3)poverty

We all know too well the beatings they hand out in our streets, and the shootings that result in the deaths of community members. Law violence can be seen when they engulf our neighbors in legal rhetoric and have them agree to actions against their interest. Poverty violence is the worst and most oppressive, it's what causes beings to never have a moment to themselves, because one wrong move and they may not have enough to eat, or the rent won't be covered, or their loved ones' medical bills won't get paid, or their child won't smile, so they sell moments of their lives to provide.

I will now turn to my concept of the PEOPLES' MILITIA. A Peoples' Militia would work just as any militia. It would be a group of individuals that stand ready to defend in a time of crisis. Of course I do believe that we are currently in a time of crisis, but that would be for communities to decide. Actually, communities would need to decide every aspect of their militia. What form of tools would be cultivated? When would they be used? How would they be practiced?

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So what do I mean by claiming to be both an anarchist and a bigot? I mean that we have all grown up in, and been shaped by, a hetero-sexist, racist, patriarchal capitalist society, and therefore, unfortunately, we all sometimes make mistakes, say things, or think thoughts, that are indeed bigoted. I am certainly not trying to excuse such bad behavior. However, as anarchists, or more generally as Leftists, it is important that we admit our occasional failings in this area, and try to improve ourselves, rather than to get defensive every time someone calls us out for an inappropriate remark, say, or argues that a particular action or attitude of ours might contribute to gender, racial, or sexual oppression.

An example might help to clarify these issues. Many times, I have witnessed (or been part of) a conversation something like this:

Radical #1: Dude, that anarchist punk girl over there is so fine. I should get her number.

Radical #2: Man, you're so sexist. You're reducing a person to a sexual object. I didn't realize you were so un-evolved.

Radical #1: WTF? How could you possibly insinuate that I'm a sexist? I am an outspoken anarchist and feminist! I am so offended.

Exchanges like this (admittedly exaggerated) one highlight many important issues. First of all, the "subject of criticism," radical #1, is not really listening to the "critic," radical #2. The "subject" is defensive, and feels attacked. The "subject" also feels, having radical credentials, above possible criticism.

On the other hand, the "critic," is attacking the person, not the behavior, and is insinuating that the "subject" has been outed as a secret sexist, or even misogynist, "in radical's clothing".

Clearly, no real exchange has occurred and neither party is really growing or learning. How can such interactions be improved?

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As radicals and feminists, our goals should be to eliminate oppression, confront oppressors, and nurture equality, feminism, and fellow feminists. To this end, nobody should be beyond criticism. On the other hand, a distinction should be made between people who are anti-feminist and are zealously hostile to our positions, and those folks who are genuinely invested in being feminist and egalitarian, but may, nonetheless, be flawed, imperfect, or simply still developing. The former deserve our opposition, the latter deserve our support (coupled with, when necessary, firm but comradely critique). The same point can be made regarding issues of racism, hetero-sexism, or any other systemically oppressive "ism."

With these goals in mind, I present the following rough guide to nurturing feminism, anti-racism, and egalitarianism WHILE at the same time continuously improving ourselves:

If you're the subject of critique, you should always:

- Listen carefully to your critic without interrupting (many of my fellow male-gendered folk can especially benefit by listening more). Consider what your critic has to say and whether or not they may in fact be correct.
- If after listening and considering, you disagree with your critic, it's OK to politely and calmly explain your difference of opinion (in the example above, people may disagree on what constitutes objectification, for instance). But always make sure to...
- Apologize for offending anyone you have offended. Even if you disagree with the critique, it's always good form to apologize and, at minimum, make an effort to not similarly offend in the future.
- Avoid being defensive, and be open to improving, growing, and learning. If you realize you've made a mistake, admit it, apologize, forgive yourself, and move on with a commitment to do better in the future.

If you're making a critique, you should always:

- Condemn behavior, not people (I'm assuming that the offending party belongs to the group of "people we want to support," as mentioned above).
- Offer alternative behaviors that could avoid the pitfalls of the "offensive" behavior.
- Try not to become too upset, and try to explain your reasoning clearly, calmly and firmly.
- Accept that people can improve and grow if they are open to it.

As discussed above, nobody in our imperfect world is perfectly free of bigotry, and you, me, and Jesse Jackson are no exception. We can go a long way toward building the world that we want to live in by opposing intolerance and bigotry both in ourselves and in others, while at the same time nurturing egalitarian tendencies. This last approach is especially important when dealing with new or inexperienced activists, or well-meaning people who don't realize when they're behaving in an intolerant manner.

Note: The pamphlet "Breaking the Manacles" (<http://zinelibrary.info/files/breakingthemanacles.pdf>) was inspirational and instrumental in the writing of this piece. I highly recommend it.

--Omar Hussein, Black Flag Editorial Staff

It is my personal stance that these militias should not limit resistance. If we are really in solidarity with each other we would not attempt to tell each other how to resist, we would just be content with resistance. Everyone contributes with their own capacities in their own manner never taking away from the next, but hopefully adding. In the words of Errico Malatesta, "Let nobody wait for someone else's initiative; let anyone take the initiatives they deem appropriate in their place, in their environment, and then try, with due precautions, to connect their own to others' initiatives." You see, many forget this wisdom. To think that there is one set mode that we all have to follow is destructive. This goes out to those beings that attempt to tell others how to resist their oppression, and act as a vanguard that must lead the herd that was born to follow.

Let's build a Peoples' Militia that can give:

1. Legal aid and advice on issues facing communities
As I said, Law is Violence against communities. Legal rhetoric is not accessible to beings who have to steadily work laborious occupations, and to pay for real legal representation would cost them the bread they fight so hard to attain. This is why a massive number of people are locked away cells, and why beings are losing their homes and being evicted without due reason.
2. Push for reforms to alleviate the pains of our oppression by marches, lobbying, and other such means. We can not overlook the immediate needs of our everyday life.
3. Create programs communally that will tend to each communities' needs
Begin to build parallel power so as to dis-empower the state and empower the people. Self sustaining programs that deal with the everyday problems of communities (for example, free daycare, clothes distribution, food programs, educational programs, and whatever else might be needed.)
4. Black Block Self Defense
Defending our communities from the physical violence that the state inflicts. Black bloc tactics include three key techniques that all assaulted communities could benefit from: (1) Identity protection, (2) the use of barricades and shields, and (3) de-arresting. These topics are addressed in more or less detail in "Don't Be a Sitting Duck" in Vol 1 of this publication and in "Slandering Anarchists is the Only Disease" in the current issue. Future pieces will further elaborate on these tactics (and many additional sources exist, e.g. "The Black Bloc Papers," available online). In the remainder of this piece, however, I would like to vaguely outline how such a Peoples' Militia could be organized in practice.

I have searched and found many groups that are fighting against the state on one of these fronts. They are strong, beautiful, but atomized. They stand alone, so are less powerful, more vulnerable. So here I advocate not the creation of these programs, because they already exist; I advocate the creation of millions more, but more importantly, the federating of these already-existing groups.

As an anarchist, I am opposed to centralized leadership in any form, particularly in the defense of communities under attack. What I suggest instead is practicing mutual aid. Instead of telling each other how to resist, we will support each other in struggle whenever common ground can be found. If it can't, we will respect the autonomous actions of each collective or group. In short, we must practice the very values we want to see flourish in the world, namely mutual aid, human solidarity, self determination, and universal autonomy.

UNTIL VICTORY OR DEATH!

ANYONE INTERESTED IN FORMING SUCH AN ORGANIZATION AS THE ONE THAT WAS VAGUELY OUTLINED IN THE ABOVE ARTICLE (PEOPLES' MILITIA) OR IN FEDERATING ON A LARGER SCALE PLEASE EMAIL US AT.: faacollective@gmail.com.

From the Editors:

Anarchist Thoughts on Independence Day

To many Americans, honoring July 4th, with the customary cook-out or trip to the lake, is a corner stone of summer. As anarchists, our feelings toward such a nationalist, state-sponsored holiday are necessarily complex. On the one hand, the American Revolution, which liberated the original 13 colonies from the British monarchy and established a new form of representative democracy, represented a step forward for human freedom. In fact, countless later revolutionaries, from the French Jacobins to Ho Chi Minh, drew inspiration from the American example. On the other hand, it is important to remember exactly for whom the American Revolutionary War was fought. Whom did it benefit? Whom did it ignore? Whose destruction did it entail?

As Howard Zinn has written extensively about, America was a class society from the outset. The Founding Fathers were members of the wealthy land-owning class, and the new society they created was only a democracy for white men. During the Revolutionary War, poor soldiers—cold, hungry, unpaid, ill-equipped farmers—often mutinied against their well-fed, fur-coated commanding officers—including George Washington—and were brutally executed. After the War was won, slavery was written into the Constitution, as were protections for private capital and the collection of debt. Women were denied suffrage. Worker and slave uprisings were savagely put down. And the Westward Expansion into “Indian” territory was undertaken, leading over the next hundred years to the wholesale extermination of tens of millions of the indigenous people of this great continent. July 4th, 1776 may have tolled the death knell of monarchy, but it ushered in the era of capital and empire.

No, we should never forget the countless millions who were maimed or murdered in the name of American exceptionalism, American capitalism, American security, and American Empire, from the Ludlow massacre to the Orangeburg massacre, from My Lai to Fallujah.

But what of today? Two hundred thirty-six years later, under the administration of our first black president, have we finally lived up to the dream of freedom, justice, and equality? Today, there are more black youth in prison for nonviolent offenses than there were slaves in 1860. Public schools are more segregated than at any time since 1968. Our government wages or sponsors neocolonialist wars and occupations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Mexico, Colombia, and Palestine, just to name some examples. They operate secret prisons and practice torture and kidnapping. And the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012 effectively nullifies much of the Bill of Rights, including due process and posse comitatus, putting in place the latent legal machinery of totalitarianism.

So as you gather with friends and loved ones to enjoy the holiday this summer, keep in mind the rivers of blood on which our great society floats, and remember that it will take another American Revolution if we ever dream of living in a “land of the free.”



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Call to Anarchist Federation

The F@@ is reaching out to all Anarchist groups interested in building a Federated body that could coordinate events, share information, issue joint statements, and generally build the Anarchist movement locally, nationally, and globally. If you or your group/collective is interested, please send us an email at faacollective@gmail.com.

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The F@@ is soliciting donations for our third annual Skid Row Clothing Giveaway. If you have new or used clothing, socks, hats, accessories or children's toys, please email faacollective@gmail.com or leave a message with Breino at 323-470-2504. All donations welcomed and appreciated.

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If you would like to subscribe to the Bl@ck Flag, please email Omar of the Free Association of Anarchists (F@@) at faacollective@gmail.com.

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